Critical & Analytical Essays

Inking the Epic: Subversive Aesthetics and Moral Recalibrations in Ramayana Graphic Novels

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Abstract

This research paper analyses how recent Indian graphic novels re-envision the *Ramayana*, not only as mythology but also as an empowering graphic-textual means of grappling with contemporary issues that concern identity, power, gender, and ethics. Using a critical reading of Vikram Balagopal's *Simian* (2014) and Samhita Arni & Moyna Chitrakar's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), the research explores how the interplay of visual composition, page layout, artistic choices, and narrative voice in both problematizes and reimagines traditional notions of dharma, heroism, and divinity. This research paper also explores how these graphic novels, evaluated through a multidisciplinary framework of graphic narrative theory, comparative mythology, and cultural studies, subvert hegemonic portrayals of Rama and recentre marginalized voices like Sita. These visual reinterpretations are not just retellings; rather, they are also acts of cultural intervention, questioning who is allowed to interpret the epic and for what purpose. By moving the visual perspective and narrative voice, they present readers with a morally nuanced and aesthetically rich encounter, prompting questions about what it means to reinterpret sacred tradition in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: *Ramayana* Graphic Novels, Visual-Textual Narratives, Cultural Reinterpretation, Dharma and Ethics, Feminist Retellings, Subversive Aesthetics, Mythology.

Introduction

Among South Asia's most long-lasting cultural works, the *Ramayana* has been retold, performed, and reinterpreted over ages. Originally conveyed via oral recitations, temple murals, classical drama, and devotional literature, the epic has moulded national moral awareness and cultural memory. But the appearance of the *Ramayana* in comic book form in the twenty-first century not only points to a shift in medium but also a metamorphosis in how the epic is seen and morally interacted with. This research examines how current Indian graphic novels restructure the *Ramayana* by combining visual aesthetics with other ethical readings, particularly in works such as *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar and *Simian* by Vikram Balagopal. They have developed a strong act of narrative reimagination, and these are not religious reproductions nor simplifications for younger viewers. Instead, they serve as visual-critical interventions that call readers to view the epic via new moral and political lenses and challenge conventional hierarchies.

Graphic novels, as a distinct narrative form, evolved from the long-standing tradition of comics, combining sequential art and literary storytelling to produce complex, extended narratives. While comic strips and illustrated stories have existed since the early 20th century, the term "graphic novel" (xviii) gained prominence in the late 1970s and 1980s, particularly with works such as Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978), which demonstrated the potential of comics to engage with mature themes, intricate plots, and deep characterization. Unlike conventional comics, graphic novels offer a sustained narrative structure, blending visual artistry with textual storytelling to create immersive and multilayered experiences. Over time, the form has expanded globally, encompassing diverse genres and styles—from autobiographical accounts and political critique to mythological reinterpretations—establishing itself as a serious medium capable of addressing cultural, social, and ethical issues with nuance and aesthetic sophistication. According to Jan Baetens, "The reader is expected to infer the story not only from the

textual and verbal indications that are given, but also from the internal structure of the image. The story told by visual means should be more than a reduplication of the story told by verbal means" (5). The graphic novel is a hybrid form whereby the visual is constitutive of meaning rather than illustrative. In the framework of the *Ramayana*, the concept implies that using image and space facilitates a different form of narrative that repositions forgotten characters, changes the reader's gaze, and provides polyphonic interpretations of ancient narratives. This reinterpretation runs along with a larger cultural movement in India characterized by passionate arguments about religious identity, political nationalism, and cultural ownership of sacred texts. Employing sequential art as a democratic forum, graphic novels provide a distinctive starting point in these arguments and challenge mythical authority. For example, *Sita's Ramayana* brings a folk-art lens and female narrative voice to a story traditionally told from a masculine perspective.

The attraction of modern Indian visual representations of epics reflects bigger patterns in global youth culture. McCloud's classic work *Understanding Comics* (1993) argues that the visual-verbal synergy of graphic novels produces an engrossing and emotionally charged reading experience especially relevant with younger, digitally native audiences. He states that "An interpretation of the result of a user study we did is that a visually stylized character leaves more for people's imagination and their projections of a fantasy self into the character" (36). This paper aims to investigate how these reinterpretations of the *Ramayana* in graphic novel form do more than modernize the myth; they aesthetically and politically reframe it. By analyzing the subversive narrative techniques and visual vocabularies of selected graphic novels, this paper examines how traditional notions of dharma, heroism, and divinity are being challenged and rearticulated for the contemporary audience.

The Visual Epic: Form, Style and the Power of Representation

The graphic novel form does not just retell tales—it recontextualizes the way stories are consumed. For epic works such as the *Ramayana*, moving from oral and text traditions to illustrated sequential narrative reconfigures not just content but

also interpretation. Form is as important as plot, and visual aesthetic becomes a form of comment. The chosen graphic novels—*Sita's Ramayana* and *Simian*—each utilize different visual languages to reread character, emotion, and philosophical complexity, testing the aesthetic and ideological integrity of previous interpretations. *Sita's Ramayana* shows this very clearly in the Patua scroll style (Bengali folk-art form) distinguished by vivid colours, elongated figures, and symbolic simplicity. Through strong lines and subdued colours, Moyna Chitrakar's art captures Sita's trauma, displacement, and spiritual fortitude, reinterpreting the epic not as a divine extravaganza but as close confessions. Furthermore, the horizontal scroll style produces a rhythmic visual movement that matches the tempo of performance-based storytelling, which evokes the epic's oral roots, using a noir-inspired black-and-white palette.

Simian shows another way that deals with Hanuman's internal conflict and broken sense of obligation. The lack of colour in *Simian* represents a deliberate aesthetic choice that reflects Hanuman's emotional weight and ambiguity in his moral struggle. The highly dense and chaotic panels mirror his psychological turbulence. This form matches what comics expert Thierry Groensteen describes as "braiding" (147), layering visual ideas to give depth and complexity beyond straight storytelling. This novel explores Hanuman as a deeply introspective character who navigates between purpose and doubt. The visual language throughout these texts does not simply illustrate the epic but actively participates in its reinterpretation. While earlier representations stressed linearity, devotion, and moral clarity, these graphic novels highlight fragmentation, introspection, and ethical plurality. Panels are moral spaces—they highlight what is seen, what is missed, and how meaning is expressed emotionally.

Centring the Marginal: Gender and Narrative Agency

In most classical versions of the *Ramayana*, Sita has always been on the edges of the story. She is projected as an iconic figure

who is respected but rarely given the chance to act. Her role has been delineated not by her voice, but by her virtue; not by her autonomy, but by her suffering. This dynamic starts to change in graphic reinterpretations like Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's *Sita's Ramayana*. These books not only put Sita back in the role of narrator, but they also use a visual language based on folk art instead of Brahminical iconography. This new way of looking at Sita is not just a creative choice—it's a political one.

The most radical thing about *Sita's Ramayana* compared to other epics is the way it tells the story. No one speaks for Sita; she speaks for herself. The first-person account lets her take charge of her own story of love, exile, betrayal, and survival. The use of Patua scroll painting, a traditional Bengali art form that is often used to tell stories about communities, makes it even clearer that Sita is taking back her story from elite and patriarchal frameworks. Samhita Arni says in interviews that the goal was to explore what happens when the silent woman finally speaks. This decision is not just a literary reversal; it's also a philosophical one. Wendy Doniger, a feminist scholar, has said that mythic retellings become revolutionary when they change how people access experience, "For myths are always context-sensitive. Acknowledging the importance of context has led me to take more seriously the possibility of comparing contexts" (xii). This is not just changing events but also changing how stories are understood, remembered, and shared. The transition from divine object to emotional subject enables the perception of Sita as an ethical agent rather than merely a moral ideal.

Moyna Chitrakar's art does not have the decorative elements that are common in other comics or temple murals. Sita's body is long, her eyes are heavy, and she is rarely in glorified poses. Instead, she is often placed at the edges of the frame or in a space that is separate from the rest of the scene, which shows how alone and lost she feels. Nick Sousanis, a comics theorist, says that this kind of spatial storytelling lets the arrangement of space carry the emotional architecture of the text: "FOR AS WE'VE SEEN WITH ERATOSTHENES AND THE CONCEPT OF PARALLAX, DISTANCE BETWEEN AND DIFFERENCES OF VIEW ARE ESSENTIAL AS LONG AS

CHANNELS FOR COMMUNICATION REMAIN OPEN AND ALIVE" (38). In this case, form and feeling come together to make a very personal picture of gendered pain and quiet resistance.

This reclamation of female narrative space transcends *Sita's Ramayana*. In *Simian*, Sita is not the main character, but her memory haunts Hanuman's mind. Instead of being a prize or a symbol, she becomes the moral centre around which Hanuman's sense of duty falls apart and comes back together. Balagopal's portrayal of her as calm, distant, and sometimes hidden makes the reader consider her to be more than just a muse. She transforms into a silent conscience, questioning the violence perpetrated by men around her. These depictions also question the traditional patriarchal view of dharma. Sita's banishment is often portrayed in the classical epic as a test of her purity or as the outcome of Rama's duty. This decision, which is politically charged, morally dubious, and emotionally devastating, is not blessed by God in *Sita's Ramayana.* Together, the image and text aim to provoke several thoughts.

According to Arvind Sharma, traditional interpretations of dharma often put women in a difficult situation by requiring them to submit for virtue and endure for honour, "Hindu women who suffered in Hindu law have been widely documented, and the modern Indian state has been active in correcting these" (9). In order to address this issue, graphic novels such as *Sita's Ramayana* totally disregard its terms. They depict Sita as thoughtful, hurt, perceptive, and morally strong rather than as submissive or rebellious. Her courage is steady rather than spectacular. These stories offer a different view of the *Ramayana* than the ones that are still popular in India today. When myth turns into medium and medium turns into message, telling stories through pictures becomes a way for women to fight back. Graphic novels like *Sita's Ramayana* not only placed marginalized voices at the centre of the narrative; it also transformed the concept of the centre by reclaiming narrative voice, spatial representation, and emotional depth.

Hanuman as Conscience and Chaos: The Subaltern Hero in *Simian*

Among the several characters in the *Ramayana* mythology, Hanuman is frequently portrayed as the perfect model of loyalty, service, and unrelenting devotion. He is deified, invulnerable, and morally clear—a symbol of strength and spiritual clarity. However, Vikram Balagopal's *Simian* radically departs from this familiar portrayal by rendering Hanuman not as a divine constant, but as a psychologically complex, emotionally fractured individual. In *Simian,* Hanuman is a subaltern hero, not because he is weak but because he is cut off from moral certainty and divine clarity.

By way of a black-and-white, film noir-inspired visual setting that strips Hanuman's story of its heavenly aura and exposes a tempestuous inner life, Balagopal's removal of colour is symbolic; this technique is one of the first in the art of comic books, as Jared Gardner states in *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling* (2025) that "The first issue of Action Comics had a colour page and a black and white page" (92). Hence, it mirrors the gravity of the narrative as well as the moral complexity Hanuman encounters. Monochrome in graphic narrative usually means internal fragmentation and moral uncertainty. These traits set Hanuman apart in *Simian*, showing him as both a devotee carrying out God's will and a sentient being trying to figure out his place in a chaotic world. The graphic novel does not show Hanuman as the perfect *sevak* (servitor); instead, it shows him questioning divine silence, doubting, and getting frustrated. He is not just completely devoted to Rama; instead, he is conflicted about it because of the consequences of fights, the cost of obedience, and the emotional aftermath of being armed for a purpose he no longer fully understands. This moral anguish places Hanuman as dharma's most tormented performer rather than its passive adherent.

The story also looks into Hanuman's conflicting nature through visual fragmentation. Panels draw attention to bodily distortion, sharply change perspectives, and cut his face in the middle of an emotion. In postcolonial literature, where the familiar self becomes strange due to ideological conflict, these aesthetic choices visually represent what Homi Bhabha refers to as "the unhomely" (9). As a source of pain rather than a victory,

Hanuman's physical prowess distances him from the humanity he defends and the divinity he serves.

Simian presents one more challenge and tries to change the psychological cost of servitude. By recontextualizing Hanuman's silence and strength as symptoms of trauma and repression, Balagopal subverts conventional understandings of heroism. The character is now a representation of those torn between duty and dissent—a situation saliently familiar to contemporary readers trying to navigate political complicity and moral exhaustion. *Simian* is not about divinity but about surviving the burden of myth. This depiction of Hanuman holds particular significance in a modern Indian context where religious characters are frequently harnessed for nationalist or sectarian agendas. By redefining Hanuman as vulnerable, reflective, and morally complex, *Simian* resists myth-making into dogma. Rather, it revives the epic's richer philosophical question: What does it mean to do the right thing when rightness itself is in flux? And so *Simian* retrieves Hanuman not as a deity to be revered but as a moral ideal for the modern age—a character of inner turmoil, moral accountability, and emotional richness. He is no longer merely the paradigmatic devotee; he is the moral witness to the price of divinely ordained violence.

Myth as Mirror: Ethics, Identity and the Role of Reinterpretation

Myths are typically treated as sacred texts that are inviolable—repositories of untouchable wisdom—in traditional educational and religious contexts. But creating myths is a dynamic process, by nature. Myths endure and speak to us because they can be reworked in response to changing ethical and cultural sensitivities. The *Ramayana*, perhaps the most authoritative of South Asian epics, has shown this adaptability across region, language, and ideology. This tradition of adaptation is carried on by contemporary graphic novels such as *Sita's Ramayana* and *Simian*, which retell the myth to address contemporary moral complexities and fractured identities. Mythologist Joseph Campbell noted that myths are "public dreams" (48) that mirror values, fears, and hopes of a people. In this manner, the *Ramayana* in graphic novel format is a locus

where the common fears—gender inequality, authoritarianism, and social exclusion—are acted out not only through narrative but also through visual allegory and reconfiguring of the story. These reinterpretations are prescriptive, not blasphemous. They do not dismiss the sacredness but question its relevance to the modern world.

Sita's Ramayana reorients ethical focus from heroic victory to emotional survival. Sita's grief, in first-person narration, is a critique of systemic silencing—both in epic narrative conventions and in contemporary gendered landscapes. The visual and verbal constructions together redirect attention from victory to sympathy, contemplation, and suffering and hence redefine what counts as moral strength, whereas *Simian* recasts Hanuman as a conflicted moral agent rather than a god. His inner turmoil raises uncomfortable but vital questions regarding the weight of obedience, the horrors of war, and the potential for moral disintegration in the service of an ideal. Through this, *Simian* captures the existential ambiguities governing modern life, especially for readers living through political, religious, and psychological fragmentation. This process of reinterpretation relates to the larger function of myth in society: it is not merely a weapon of cultural unity but also a system of critique. As Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote, "Myth is considered a part of language but operates on a higher, more complex level with its own constituent units" (208). Yet the power of myth lies in reconciling them with layers of meaning. The graphic novel interpretations adopt this logic—keeping contradictory truths side by side, instead of reconciling them.

In addition, these reinterpretations place the reader not in a position of passive reception but of ethical engagement. The broken panels, moving perspective, and mixed styles require active interpretation. This strategy is consistent with what reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss called the "horizon of expectations" (175). Each reader has their own cultural context, and reinterpretations succeed when they strain or defy these contexts.

Conclusion

The *Ramayana*, India's greatest epic, has never belonged to a sole voice or unchanging interpretation. Its perpetuation lies in its capacity for retelling, reinterpretation, and reuse across generations. The two contemporary graphic novels discussed here are *Sita's Ramayana* and *Simian,* which has continued this tradition not by preserving the epic's sanctity in unchanging form but by affirmatively reinterpreting it through new ethical, visual, and political vocabularies. These books are acts of creative dissidence, challenging who speaks, who is at the centre of whose lives, and how the divine is revealed. They reclaim silenced voices, disturb moral absolutes, and challenge received myths to critical thinking through artistic play and narrative subversion. By doing so, they make the epic a living document.

Sita's Ramayana retrieves voice and narrative power for a character long silenced, and *Simian* welcomes readers into the inner psychological landscape of Hanuman, laying bare the moral cost of compliance and mythic demand. These works together show that retelling is not changing history—it is recognizing it. It acknowledges the profound depth and complexity of the epic, its inherent contradictions, and its potential to illustrate the similarities between our contemporary issues and those from ancient times. These graphic novels defy the common practice of using old stories for political purposes or transforming them into simplistic symbols of cultural identity. They encourage self-reflection, complexity, and conversation. The graphic novel is a site where the ethical and the aesthetic coalesce. When brought to the *Ramayana*, such confluence generates not distortion but the unveiling of new modes of vision for old tales.

It is not desecration to retell the sacred. It is a loving gesture. It is a recognition that inquiry enhances rather than diminishes sacredness. By introducing emotion, uncertainty, and graphic experimentation into the centre of the epic, these graphic novels remind us that myth is not an artifact but a living dialogue between past and future, between word and reader, and between tradition and innovation. With diversely divided global cultures, environmental despoliation, and moral

confusion, these reworkings of myth have the potential to do more than just provide aesthetic enjoyment; they can provide moral definition, emotional touch, and cultural commentary.

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